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**Female Football Players: Encountering Physical Capital in Mixed-sex Football**

In this paper, I examine the contribution that mixed-sex football can make to the development of female football players. Girls’ choices about participating in physical exercise may be influenced by a number of factors, but I want to address specifically the traditionally ‘masculine’ sport of football to consider the extent to which binary gender is a limited construct. Using a method of narrative interviews for data collection, I draw on the experiences of eight women ranged from aged 23 to 58. There was an emergent tension between the objective construction of gender both materially and symbolically and the subjective experiences of participants. This was evident in underlying anxieties apparent in fieldwork, in terms of the physical learning environment and acquisition of football capital, but mixed-sex football showed to be a positive environment for developing female football players.

**Introduction**

With growing interest in the Football Association Women’s Super League (FAWSL) and increasing participation numbers,<sup>1</sup> there are positive indications that women’s football in England is enjoying the benefits of more coherent structures, which can fulfil the professional aspirations of female football players. Moreover, the progression of the women’s English national team in competition has begun to invite more attention to women’s football from a broader audience.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the women’s game retains a peripheral place within the context of football in England as a whole. The comparative levels of development between men and women’s football is indicative of this and participation numbers on their own are not a sufficient indicator for examining the growth of the women’s game. I examine some of the challenges that participants in this research have faced playing mixed-sex football, in order to understand how the gradual age extension<sup>3</sup> represents a positive step for moving women’s football forward. A key challenge for instance, is to contest discourse that depicts physicality in women’s bodies as undesirable. For example, when conducting the fieldwork for this

research, I was interested to note the emphasis participants placed on their actual development as football players, particularly during mixed-sex matches.

Current literature on the topic of women and football is varied. For example, in Swedish mixed-sex floorball the implication that ‘boys are better than girls at sport’, is challenged, if not fully transcended.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, although sex difference in many cases were reinforced in mixed-settings, there was evidence to suggest changing attitudes of men towards women players over time.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, in football’s changing relationship with masculinity, the focus on homophobia<sup>6</sup> is a useful exploration of the association with sexualities in football cultures. For women who play football, this association tends to draw a relationship to lesbian identities where football provides to some extent a place for expression.<sup>7</sup> This provides context in terms of an attitudinal standpoint. This paper contributes by focussing on physicality and the gendered body, and how, in a mixed setting, female football players are creative in negotiating discourse that pejoratively frames physicality in women’s bodies. The underpinning narrative questions the potential benefits for player development which may then speak more directly to policy concerns, particularly in terms of encouraging young women into football.

Drawing on eight narrative interviews to investigate the experiences of participants, builds on previous research that considered the emergence and maintenance of gendered cultural practices in football.<sup>8</sup> This work drew on the concept of the third-space,<sup>9</sup> which posed a theoretical challenge to pejorative representations of women in football.<sup>10</sup> In this frame, I began to consider how mixed-sex football, specifically, opens spaces that support re-mapping ideas of the normative physically gendered body. Sex-segregation in sport evades evaluation of individual characteristics or skills.<sup>11</sup> Instead, one is ‘assessed’ on the basis of one’s sex and in terms of developing female football players this is an interesting point. Participants intimated that coaching football would be more effective if based on assessing competence rather than

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there is a *natural* (physical) pre-disposition and a gendered body that is suitable for playing football.

Previous work used the ‘third-space’ to explore masculine/feminine dualism in sport and look for ways that could account for variations. These ideas then, underpin the trajectory of this paper. I examined participants’ experiences in informal leisure spaces of playing mixed sex football to explore the extent to which there are creative spaces. Such interactions between marginal and dominant cultures are useful in showing that there are contests to *authentic*, in this case gendered, physical bodies. I engage this position in two ways. Firstly, I look at the theoretical context in order to understand why centring femininity in a sports context prevents, or discourages, women to develop physical bodies suited to playing in contact sports.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the paper pursues a narrative that challenges the limitations of gender dualism sustained by sex-segregation in sports, in order to forward a physically based feminism. Secondly, having set this theoretical context, I draw on participants’ biographies and experiences of playing football in single and mixed-sex matches, to examine the acquisition of physical capital. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of capital,<sup>13</sup> I discuss a way to problematize segregation by looking at physical capital as a resource that can be helpful for understanding the development of female football players in a way that may challenge negative discourses that frame female physicality. In this context, I consider how mixed-sex football can be a productive space for players’ development.

**Theoretical Frame: Segregation and Capital**

In this section, I outline a number of theoretical approaches concerned with sex-segregation in sport. I suggest that anxieties underpinning female physicality and transgressions into perceived masculine body types persist into contemporary sporting discourses.<sup>14</sup> As such, Roth and Basow<sup>15</sup> are critical of feminisms that have not substantively challenged ‘femininity’ as a

concept, arguing that there is need for a 'physically based feminist strategy'. Such a thesis is interesting, as mixed football offers the potential to contest normative feminine bodies. For instance, in 2019, The International Association of Athletic Federations' ruling in the case of Caster Semenya, is framed by discourse that asserts she is 'not a real woman'.<sup>16</sup> In this, there is a wider relationship to football, which privileges sentimentalised masculine physicality.

Although segregation is established in practice, sex categorization has a problematic and diverse history. Parks-Pieper outlines technologies in the scientific field that have been used to measure sex-differences for example. Despite the changing definitions that underpin sex-categorization in sports, from anatomical, through chromatin and DNA testing, then hormonal analysis, such examination fails to confine sex to a binary division.<sup>17</sup> My sociological interest in this idea was provoked when participants for this study were forthright in how they themselves physically challenged the fragility of this division. Moreover, research conducted at Brunel University indicated that mixed-sex football offers the prospect to budding football players, opening opportunities for development of skills and physical capital.<sup>18</sup> As Channon *et al* have cited, segregation is limiting and early interventions in terms of mixed-sport settings might be a helpful way to challenge gender stereotypes.

'If more sex-integrated opportunities were available in youth sport settings they could provide early and consistent interruptions of the gender binary that might contribute to stronger mechanisms for feminist resistance.'<sup>19</sup>

In these terms, mixed-sex football can be an expressively creative space. In order to find ways to understand the challenges that face female football players therefore, and the pathways that are (or are not) open, participants often reflected on their physical abilities as a football player. This raised questions with regard to mixed-sex spaces as productive for facilitating

development. To put this into context, consider that focus on average differentials underpins gender segregation<sup>20</sup> by prioritising the objective limits of scientific discourse.<sup>21</sup> In such a way, 'knowledge' about the body is historically laden and so I approached this research drawing on the grounded practises of participants to the extent that their experiences were a means of resistance.<sup>22</sup> The emergent narrative founded on biography and participants' experiences of playing football, was a way to understand how they negotiated and developed physical capital. In this way, the body is a focal point in order to show how women, when playing football, can challenge and transform ways of understanding femininity. To this extent, participants 'communicate' with the social world<sup>23</sup> in the process of becoming competent football players.

The question emerged then, is how might one institute a framework that decentres sex as *the* marker of sporting ability, and in doing so, contest assumptions as to whether football is *unsuitably* feminine or *suitably* masculine? The perception that women are less skilled than men is interpreted, and reinforced, on the premise that it is incompatible with acceptable femininity. Furthermore, when women's physicality is linked to sexuality, it is often disparaging, and in football terms, a view that belittles the standing of the women's game.<sup>24</sup> One participant for example, recounted a conversation with a friend who stated that women were '*just not that good at football*' (Pat in interview). Such an analysis draws on suppositions regarding the synthesis of sex and gender embodied in physical capital. When participants transgressed bodily convention, it became apparent the extent to which they were regulated by discourse that conceptualises football to be a naturally masculine sport.<sup>25</sup> In such ways, I was interested to examine how mixed-sex football can become an aspect of not only developing football players, but also, a space for reconfiguring gendered bodies. In Pavlidis and Connor's discussion of integration in roller derby, they argue this point, 'we cannot successfully integrate the gender spectrum and reduce/eliminate discrimination until one of the most obvious, visible, valorized and re-produced binaries of gender is broken – that of *sport* and *women's sport*'.<sup>26</sup>

Capturing participants grounded physical engagements then constituted the empirical basis of the research, underpinned by the concept of capital (later termed football capital) derived from habitus and experiences of the gendered body. Just as one's gender is constructed by what we *do*, as Young has discussed 'scaling bodies'<sup>27</sup> or that Butler outlines how the 'regulatory norms of sex' are constituted in material bodies,<sup>28</sup> the extent to which girls have not had the same opportunities, or have not been encouraged to play football, puts boys at a distinct advantage when entering the 'field'.<sup>29</sup> In this way, habitus impacts upon gender and therefore, participants' early experiences. For example, many of the women interviewed had not begun playing football on a regular basis until well into their teens or had had fractured experiences because there was not a local women's team. In this way, the perception that women are less able is exacerbated in ways that has been limited by their expectations (that girls can play football) and aspirations (to be a football players), because they are female.

By virtue of one's gendered socialization, the accumulation and deployment of physical capital works to maintain the dominant position of men's football/male players. As such, physical capital is a resource, monopolized and sustained institutionally. For the purposes of this paper, physical capital is considered a less valuable, even desirable form of capital for girls. Cockburn and Clarke for example, identify the masculinized doer (the tomboy) and the feminized non-doer.<sup>30</sup> Hills has suggested that this dichotomy influences the decisions that girls make with regard to physical education, that is, they may not choose to play football nor be encouraged to do so.<sup>31</sup> Yet there are patterns of resistance within this matrix, where women transgress normative (gendered) body types, and interaction in mixed-sex football, instigated disruptions, just as Pfister discusses 'leaks in hegemonic masculinity'. This idea has re-opened fields of enquiry, by contesting normative gendered body types that then pose a challenge to the narrative that football is a natural male social field.<sup>32</sup> Such theoretical premises are useful for exploring ways to transition from a binary understanding of gender to one which is more



nuanced, and the challenges that face female football players. In terms of development then, in the following sections I outline the methodological basis of the research and examine ways in which participants were active in negotiating structural limitations and in acquiring the requisite skills, that is, developing physical capital, in order to fulfill their aspirations of becoming a football player.

***Fieldwork and Sample Frame: Notes on Methodology***

Fieldwork was conducted in the north-west of England between January 2013 and June 2014. Participants were drawn purposively from a range of backgrounds based on their current or former participation in football. Many were still playing in a variety of contexts, including five-a-side, full match single-sex and mixed settings. In order to assemble the sample, I recruited participants from connections and friendship networks maintained from my days as a player, from my late-teenage years and through my twenties. The paper draws on eight narrative interviews of 60 to 150 minutes in length with amateur female football players. Participants' ages ranged from 23 at the youngest to 58 at the eldest. Therefore, the temporal framework covers a period of approximately 40 years as determined by the age range of participants (from the early 1970s-2014). In order to understand these temporal aspects of the narrative, I specify participants' ages, along with the approximate years to which each excerpt is referring.

The trajectory of the research design draws on biography as a way to account for *voices* (women's) that have historically been marginalised. Such voices are critical reflections on how gender is constructed within football, which highlight inequality and power relationships. Poulton has discussed the difficulties in accessing sample populations as a woman when researching men's football,<sup>33</sup> and the basis of this point is to some extent, also very relevant for this research. The issue with this research is not about access to the field, but about a methodology that can articulate struggles for identity and belonging, situated amongst

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3 masculinities that so dominate football cultures. The representation of participants' voices  
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5 accessed through their experiences of playing football in mixed-sex situations underpins a way  
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7 to think about narrative. Building on participants' biography for instance, began simply by  
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9 asking for recollections on first football memories. Through this reflective process,  
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11 participants' interactions with institutional contexts demonstrated how playing football was a  
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13 frame in which the narrative was 'produced, recounted and consumed'.<sup>34</sup> Participants' voice is  
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15 so important here, they are positioned centrally so that the frame of playing mixed-sex football  
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17 are explained through experience. The emergent narrative draws on 'stories of personal  
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19 experience, organized around the life world of the storyteller',<sup>35</sup> and when comparing  
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21 biographies, participants' reflections often engaged the topic of mixed-sex football.  
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26 In terms of transcript analysis, emergent themes were coded when participants also  
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28 actively engaged in resistance strategies to counteract the physical prohibitions of established  
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30 femininity and embodiment. When participants discussed playing with boys for example, the  
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32 opportunities to develop skills and build confidence placed attitudes (about one's gender) under  
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34 scrutiny. This was prevalent in discussions of stereotyping and examples of being branded a  
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36 tom-boy. It was notable that such disruption emerged across the age range of the sample,  
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38 illustrated the bodily experiences for participants i.e. through gaining physical capital. With  
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40 this in mind, the focus of the following section is to show how participants negotiated discourse  
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42 that diminishes the physical female body, and to understand the manner in which they have  
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44 sustained their participation despite this. Negotiation was evident in excerpts when participants  
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46 talked about developing physical capital, and although not expressed in these terms, it is  
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48 interesting how they reflected on their proficiency at playing football.  
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**Acquiring Physical Capital: Single-sex Football Matches**

In this section, I begin by looking at physical encounters in single-sex football in order to contextualise discussion on mixed-sex football in the following section. Many participants explained that they did not begin playing football until they were in their teens or there were breaks because they did not have the opportunities to play football on a frequent basis. This is indicative of the extent to which participants were having to learn and develop skills at a much later age than would be expected for boys. Sandra (42) for example, outlined expectations of her own abilities and those of her team-mates. She recounted an example of joining a women’s football team at university in the early 1990s, and the comparative levels of ability. As a consequence of systemic exclusion, or perhaps fear of derision (maybe a combination of the two), she reflected in the issue of proficiency.

Sandra: There were a lot of women who played on the football team, and it was like the first time they’d really played football, and it was noticeable the difference, as you do if you play against men in a sport, whatever sport it may be, and they’ve been playing it since they were young, and then you come to it late and it’s [pause], I do think it improves you because, you know, you’re used to the touch, or control or passing. Just used to kicking a football, that kind of doesn’t leave you so [pause], yeah, I’d definitely say that helps, no doubt about it whatsoever.

Sandra had explained earlier in interview that she had played some mixed-sex football, and I note it here because this experience is a benchmark by which she evaluates the standard of her own ability, and those of her female peers. Sandra verifies her competence based on the competencies of the people around her. In the quotation above, she cites disparity between herself, having played football from a young age, and other players, who had not. Sandra

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3 highlights the 'problem' of categorizing gender, focussing instead on acquisition (or lack  
4 thereof): *'it's just a shame that, 'cause I didn't realise until that time how kind of unique my*  
5 *experience was, 'cause it [pause] I mean when I was at university there wasn't anybody who'd*  
6 *played it when they were younger.'*  
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12 Moreover, Nina (25) recalled some of the challenges that she faced when she explained  
13 her introduction into football. She had not begun playing until in her early 20s, so this account  
14 is based on experiences around 2010. There is an active sense of accomplishment as she talked  
15 about acquiring skills and tactical knowledge, and it is interesting to note this transition into her  
16 self-identification as a football player. The narrative veers from very formative experiences,  
17 through her development, demonstrating an exponential learning curve with the development  
18 of 'foot skills' and heightened sense of confidence as she moves through the team ranks.  
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31 Nina: I think I learned as I went on really, I started with the third-team and had a few  
32 like, shambolic matches. Well because I'd always played in goal, but with five-aside I'd  
33 pretty much always stayed on my line, but with 11-aside there was things, the coach  
34 would tell me where to stand and go forward and do this and that. Then I moved up to  
35 Second Team the same year, and then two years later to First Team. But it's been like a  
36 learning curve only this year I felt, like confident in knowing what I was doing, because  
37 I had the like foot skills from 5-aside, but it was just, yes, tactically, and just positioning  
38 and that kind of stuff.  
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51 In this environment, Nina talks about the difference between competent and non-competent  
52 football players, constructing a frame in which she learns, but also evaluates the competencies  
53 of her team-mates in comparison to her own through observations of spatial awareness  
54 (explaining positioning during a football match). Nina measures her own capabilities and  
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3 evaluates her performance by the benchmarks set by her coach, and in this way, her learning is  
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5 systemic as she acquires tactical knowledge, taking instruction on field. In this way, it  
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7 highlights how women's participation in football (and sport generally) tends to be disciplined  
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9 when players are confronted with questions about their sexuality and sexual identity.<sup>36</sup> Nina's  
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11 example allows us to re-focus and prioritize development and learning as opposed to gender or  
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13 sexuality.  
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17 In such a context, acquiring physical capital was one of the most significant challenges  
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19 that emerged in interviews. Being a good football player for example, was not necessarily  
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21 conflated with robust and physical exchange, but there is a sense of the body becoming  
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23 functional and an asset on the football pitch. This was a challenge for participants because it  
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25 has been compounded by historical segregation, and many anxieties were arguably a  
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27 consequence of systemic inequality. Participants might not verbalize these sentiments in such  
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29 terms, but it has had an impact on their development football players. Discussion that emerged  
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31 during the course of interviews that questioned discourses, which frame normative  
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33 masculine/feminine bodies, in particular, positioning physical capital as a resource that is way  
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35 to challenge segregation, and from discussion around participation in single and mixed-sex  
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37 football settings, participants were actively transgressive in direct, bodily, ways.<sup>37</sup>  
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43 Sandra went on to discuss her experiences of playing football at college in the late  
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45 1980s, before moving onto university. Opportunities dropped-off after secondary school, when  
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47 she was excluded from spaces that would allow her to learn and to become an accomplished  
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49 football player. As she went on to explain:  
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54 Sandra: Well sort of after high school, I didn't, sixth-form college, again it was sort of  
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56 knocking around with the lads and playing. When I went to university, I thought it would  
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58 be nice to have organisation. We had coaching, we played 11-a-side, we played 5-a-side,  
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3 so obviously we played against other universities, and it was interesting to see the  
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5 different standards that were available kind of thing, because you had some, 'cause it's  
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7 like having such a big gap out and not really being coached, you come up against  
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9 someone who's very nippy because I played right-back in 11-a-side, somebody's who's  
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11 very nippy and you're thinking, 'well okay, I can run, but now what am I supposed to do  
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13 against you?', kind of thing. Whereas if I had had the coaching earlier [pause], yeah.  
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19 Sandra's assessment of ability and variable standards of quality in women's football is a  
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21 development issue indicative of historically poor structural support, prevalent in participants'  
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23 response to their learning environment. Participants' self-awareness and evaluation of their  
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25 competence relative to other players around them, which Nina, Jody (28) and Elizabeth (58)  
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27 discuss in terms of engagement, is apparent in the emergent sense of how they learn.  
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29 Interestingly, despite the age differences here, Elizabeth is discussing experiences from when  
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31 was much younger in and around the 1970s, yet there was a common tendency amongst  
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33 participants to illustrate 'becoming' a football player, with reference to their coaching. For  
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35 Elizabeth, playing football initially was a challenge and despite her reservations, she attains a  
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37 sense of resolution because playing with better players made a positive contribution to her  
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39 development. It might seem an obvious point to make, but in cases where participants did not  
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41 begin playing football on a regular basis until they were older, often when they had left school,  
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43 uncertainty regarding footballing ability was palpable.  
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51 Nina: I think it was a lot the coaches and then sometimes the players, I think it's mainly  
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53 positioning or where people would just go [say], 'go there', 'stand off your line', 'go  
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55 closer to that line', and also a lot of telling you to be louder, communicate, or take my  
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time, or stuff like that. But I must say I think I've had some excellent coaches, which really helps because you can feel yourself progressing as well.

Jody: I think I've got better. I don't think I had very much tactical awareness and especially because I'm a defender, playing five-a-side, six-a-side, you've got to be quite mature, intelligent, quite switched on to the play at the back, 'cause it's all about positioning, you know. That's probably the main part of the job isn't it really at the back? *[Did you improve with coaching?]* Oh yeah. There's a girl there who's 18, she's actually the manager's daughter, and she plays at centre back and she tells us all what to do, communicates with us, and I've picked up a lot off her. Even though she's like 10 years younger [laughs]!

Elizabeth: Because you know, if I don't know the players that I'm playing against, I think maybe they had that advantage because they started whatever time and they'd had the training, they'd gone through the basics, and those tactics and they kind of knew what to do, yeah [pause]. I found it quite a steep learning curve, but it was worth doing.

These frameworks are transgressive, provoked by a dialogue between coach and player. Nina explains how she reacted to instructions from her coach, Jody positively responds when asked if she improved with her coach (both had also previously been critical of some poor coaching). The dialogue illustrates adaptation of the body by acquiring physical capital in a process of intersections between the objectives of learning and the players' evaluations of their own abilities. Importantly, this intersection between the structural progression of development and the agency of players shows how women's football is a transgressive space as participants were active in disrupting the tension between physicality and femininity. Developing physical

capital is an embodied experience, and female football players are transgressive in the respect that their engagement challenges what we ‘know’ about football being ‘masculine’. As shown in these examples, women’s football is about much more than just increasing numbers, it is also about challenging conventions established in and through cultural practices. As such, the development of physical capital in women transgresses normative understandings of gender when it is situated in the body, and I suggest that this opens up in spaces when women can be physical.

### ***Developing Football Capital: Mixed-sex Football***

In this final section, I examine participants’ experiences of playing mixed-sex football in informal leisure contexts. I want to convey how these were very creative spaces, or a space that encouraged creativity in terms of disrupting how we understand discourse regarding femininity. As such, these are spaces that can be a productive place for player development. Participants discussed challenges they have faced participants in terms of attaining a competent level of football, mainly when it is directly compared with men’s football, as if this is a framework for signification. Despite this, mixed-football was a positive space that facilitated learning, competencies and confidence.<sup>38</sup> Hills and Croston have examined discourses of male superiority as they emerge in PE, finding that some girls actively challenged physical assumptions regarding *incapable* femininity and endeavoured to negotiate such gendered discourses.<sup>39</sup> In developing physical capital, mixed-sex environments offered opportunity whereby, the bodily experiences of participants transform what we understand about women’s physical capacities and instead centre the spaces that develop *football capital*.

In the following transcripts, the physical environment enabled participants to contest anxieties around femininity and being ‘physical’, disrupting the narrative that women cannot



‘do’ football. The examples in this section are taken from a range of interviews mostly from informally arranged, or unofficial, football matches. Participants discussed how they negotiated their development, and in doing so, manoeuvred spaces for expression. Jody talked about some of her early experiences of playing mixed-sex football and considered this in terms of how it contributed to her development as a football player during the late 1990s.

Jody: I think at that time I think I mixed in quite well with the boys at that time, because obviously strength isn’t really an issue and speed is kind of even as well, so [pause] I think I mixed in quite well at that age. I think it (mixed football) does definitely help your touch and your passing.

Jody’s discussion is interesting because she explains the benefits that she felt, emphasizing style as being dependent on the individuality of a player. She does not talk about this in terms of gender, nor does she try to characterize it in such a way. She intimates that evaluating individual competence, rather than competence based on assumptions about one’s sex, is a more equitable. Jody opens up a dialogue to the extent that she illustrates how playing mixed football had been a positive aspect of learning, specifically with reference to passing. She extends her development, indeed explains it, relative to specific skills that have aided her development rather than her sex.

Furthermore, Jody underlined the possibilities made available in mixed football for female football players to directly contest and assert themselves on physical ability. In these interactions, it becomes apparent that this is a space, which enables participants to stake a claim for their right to play football. Such non-conformity illustrates how is constructed in the physical environment.<sup>40</sup> As participants recounted their experiences, the issue of segregation is

an issue because they felt themselves as a player, the empowerment physically, is actively constituted in their body. Millie (27) outlined some of her formative experiences of playing football and its contribution to her competency as a football player in the mid-1990s. Playing mixed football set a standard for her, and she cites it here as a positive aspect of her development.

Millie: I always played [football] with boys [when I was younger]. My neighbour, his brother, their best mate at the time, so they were all boys, and my sister occasionally, but I was always out playing football with boys. And I think it made me a better player because I was striving to keep up with them.

For some participants, the physicality of playing a contact sport was integral to taking part. This is an interesting analysis, because it challenges ‘knowledge’ about sex and physical capability. *Emma (23): ‘I was probably one of the biggest there with the boys, but I remember going with the boys-team and I used to turn up, and they were like, ‘oh my God, they’ve got a girl playing for them,’ But after the game they couldn’t believe it like, I was that good.’* For female football players, if physicality is perceived to diminish one’s femininity emerges with women’s transgressions into masculine spaces. To the extent that segregation reinforces gender stereotypes, Emma present a challenge to ‘body scaling’,<sup>41</sup> potentially facilitated by her younger age, and perhaps indicative of the developing women’s game. Moreover, although Millie talked about a poor experience in the past, she did hold the view that there is no substantive difference between women and men’s football. There are conflicting points here though, and Millie did insinuate that there are behaviours that are inherently gendered.

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2  
3 Millie: It's played no different to the men's game, slightly slower I think, sometimes. I  
4  
5 think it's not so much, it's not a physical thing anymore either. I think what's stopping  
6  
7 mixed football is the PC world we live in. Girls are still deemed lesser physically than  
8  
9 men. At the age of 12 you become more physically aware of yourself, your own anatomy,  
10  
11 it's nothing to do with physicality, it's nothing to do with skill set, it's when puberty hits,  
12  
13 I've played with boys at 13 and just been groped, but there are girls that are not going to  
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15 be able to deal with that.  
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21 Gillian (55) talked about training games against international under-18s (male) teams and  
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23 in doing so, opened up a further aspect of debates that underpin segregation. For instance,  
24  
25 the sex/gender binary focusses on dualities that limit women's participation in football i.e.  
26  
27 that women cannot be physical. Gillian makes a point about strength for example: *Gillian:*  
28  
29 *I mean I've played with men and against men in training games. So, for example, when we*  
30  
31 *were with the [national women's team] seniors, we often used to play against the [national]*  
32  
33 *under-18 boys as a warm up before an international. And you notice the difference because*  
34  
35 *clearly men have much greater physical strength and can kick the ball much longer and*  
36  
37 *harder'. The point is based on possibilities that one's sex is a determinant of physicality,*  
38  
39 *but also about the 'aesthetic' of how football should be played.<sup>42</sup> How can we problematize*  
40  
41 *this narrative of physicality, whereby it is more constructive to think about sex as a*  
42  
43 *continuum,<sup>43</sup> which is particularly evident in a mixed-sex environment. Gillian: 'there are*  
44  
45 *things that women I think are better at than men. Sometimes it's positional, sometimes when*  
46  
47 *you see young players, I think the girls are technically better than the boys, say up to 14*  
48  
49 *certainly.'* Becoming conversant, and developing physical capital, is not by nature and  
50  
51 masculine or feminine, but that training is a very fundamental facet of acquisition.  
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3 In the extracts that follow, Gillian, Pat, Millie and finally Martha (42), intimate that  
4 the conditions of a mixed-sex football environment present a space in which the boundaries  
5 of gender and physicality are tested, and the precariousness of ‘gender’ as a construct is  
6 arguably contested by women’s physicality. Pfister refers to ‘leaky’ hegemonic  
7 masculinities,<sup>44</sup> when this thesis is situated in the context of mixed-sex football, it  
8 problematizes the naturalness inferred by masculine/feminine physical embodiment. In the  
9 practice of heading a ball for example.

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21 Gillian: They [men] can also head the ball better generally, although that’s technical and  
22 can be coached, you know. After 14 the boys develop. But boys pick up a lot of bad  
23 habits from playing casually you know, whereas as girls don’t play casually as much and  
24 are coached better, often the technical skills are better developed and more mature than  
25 boys up until 14.

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35 Pat went on to talk about tactics, extending Gillian’s argument that mixed-sex football  
36 can set the conditions that disrupt ‘femininity’, and she is equally dismissive that there are  
37 substantive differences between men and women’s football anyway. Her experiences are  
38 illustrative of a framework in which she benchmarks to particular criteria, that gender is not  
39 the primary factor in meeting the demands of playing, but rather the relative standards of the  
40 other players.

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51 Pat: Not really, I don’t think it is played in any different way to women’s football apart  
52 from just a bit faster. You know, tactics wise not at the standard I was playing, I mean  
53 it’s only up until last year I played five-a-side. Me and a couple of girls from the football  
54 team played with the lads, and I don’t think we stuck out massively for being not as good.

Obviously depends on the standard the lads you play with, but yeah, it's never bothered me.

Pat, when discussing the standard, benchmarking her ability as a football player against other players, argued the point that defining equitable standards was not really about her sex, but about assessing and attaining relative levels of competence. In short, learning how to play the game when developing competencies is a matter of generating supportive conditions.<sup>45</sup>

Martha talked about her experiences over quite an extensive period from the age of five up to her early 20s. Martha makes a point about acquiring physical capital, facilitated in an environment that encouraged her to be creative and transgress assumptions about her ability to play football as a woman. Martha is a resistant voice that contests the sex-gender binary, which instead locates mixed-football as a beneficial way of learning.

Martha: My dad, my dad and my granddad basically taught me. I was joining my father's sister's husband who was a football coach, so I used to go since I was five, football training, with the boys. *[You actually had some organised training from when you were very young?]*. Oh yeah, I joined the boys. But in-between (taking part in other sports), every time I had, I played football, mainly with men's groups. I used to go every Wednesday and Saturday and Sunday, and I have three different men's groups, it was like, they were ex-footballers, I was 20, 19 something like that, and they were in 40s/50s, they were proper ex-footballers.

Martha's testimony was different from other interviews in that learning and acquiring in mixed situations was her normal experience. She undermines the concerns that inform gender segregation, she is disruptive because she is engaged in de-traditionalising broader discourses

that frame these spaces as authentically or naturally, masculine. She articulates a sense of her own physical capacity and explains that she does not want to be treated differently.

*[What was that like then?]* Martha: I was obviously, everybody, it was indoor, because I play indoor football and outdoor football, how many people came? About six-a-side or seven-a-side, eight-a-side, you know how many? Eight-a-side was too much. But it was, I would say, I was pretty good because I was younger, and my stamina was very good, playing basketball as well, so I was fit that time. Secondly, everybody, I just mentioned to everybody ‘please don’t take me as a woman, take me as one of you’. So many times, I had so many bruises you know. I get so many bruising because I don’t mind to get shot (in the way of a shot), I always put my body in front (of) the shot and never move, whether I get it in the face, body, back, I just don’t mind. It was very exciting for me.

I suggest that Martha’s bullishness and her persuasive confidence about her own abilities is a result of playing football from a young age. In sum, many of the women interviewed had not had this opportunity; they were stopped from playing football and were encouraged to play other, ‘female’, sports,<sup>46</sup> and this seemed to be a source of anxiety. Martha’s case circumvents such anxiety as she transcends gendered obstacles, being physical, acquiring football capital creatively, in a mixed context because she interacts in such a way that does not conform, or overcomes gender conventions and therefore assumptions about her ability to play football.

## Conclusion

This paper discussed women’s experiences of playing mixed-sex football in amateur and informal leisure situations. It set out two main contentions in order to examine how we might understand, sociologically, the narratives that emerged from participants’ lives. First, how can

women's experiences of playing mixed-football enable the identification of pathways which could facilitate the growth of the women's game, and second, to what extent interactions in the physical setting of the football pitch facilitates assessment of the contribution that mixed-football can make to the development of football capital? From these contentions, increasing participation numbers alone i.e. systematically widening participation, also requires a much deeper understanding of the relationship between footballing cultures, physicality and the female body. Mixed-sex football shows us how such discourse around sex/gender disguise complexities in the way that femininity (and masculinity for that matter), can be *done* and experienced. More pragmatically, increasing participation amongst girls and women in football may be progressed by renegotiating the 'ideal' gendered body, as highlighted by this research. It is the value of women's own accounts in negotiating practices that is fundamental to contesting prevailing gender discourses. Insofar as there is more interest in research around non-segregation, and segregation, this research is an initial step into examining the capacity of women themselves to centre to debate around segregation through their own participation. In such a way, participants, when examining their experiences of playing mixed-sex football, can disrupt conventional ideas about gender 'performances' and consequently, the football body. Although the possibility for such challenges would seem to derive from moves at the level of governance by increasing opportunities for women and girls, this should not be the sole focus. Certainly, more progressive governance e.g. the Women's Super League, have facilitated the opportunity for women to compete, but such spaces still demand that women actively engage pejorative constructs regarding female performance in football.



## Notes

1. UEFA, *Women's Football across the National Associations*, 2016-17.
2. 'Record viewing figures expected for Lionesses' Euro 2017 semi-final' in *The Guardian*. 3rd August 2017
3. Changes to Football Association rules in 2015/16 season to allow mixed-sex football up to, but not including, aged 18 as defined in Rule J(3): 'Players in a Match must be of the same gender save for matches in a playing season in the age groups Under 7 to Under 18 inclusive' (The Rules of the Football Association, 2017-18).
4. Larneby, 'Transcending gender hierarchies? Young people and floorball in Swedish school sport', 1202
5. Winiarska et al, 'They kick you because they are not able to kick the ball', 1332-1348.
6. McGrath, *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football*.
7. Drury, 'It seems really inclusive in some ways, but ... inclusive just for people who identify as lesbian', 421; Caudwell, 'Queering the Field?', 183-96.
8. [author]
9. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, 54.
10. [author]
11. Buzuvis, *Caster Semenya and the Myth of a Level Playing Field*, 38.
12. Roth and Basow, 'Femininity, Sports, and Feminism', 245.
13. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 81-93.
14. In the cases of Mokgadi Caster Semenya and Dutee Chand.
15. Roth and Basow, 'Femininity, Sports, and Feminism', 247.
16. Wheaton et al, 'Making Sense of the Caster Semenya Ruling', online.
17. Parks-Pieper, 'Preserving la difference': The Elusiveness of Sex-segregated Sport', 1.
18. Hills, L. and Croston, 'It Should Be Better All Together', 591-605; Hills, 'Friendship, Physicality, and Physical Education', 317-336.
19. Channon et al, 'The Promises and Pitfalls of Sex Integration in Sport and Physical Culture'. 1119.
20. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport*. 291.
21. Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, 290.
22. Rutherford, 'A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference', 24-26.
23. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 92.
24. Boyle et al, 'Representing the Female Pugilist', 103; Mennesson, 'Hard Women and Soft Women', 21.
25. Harris, 'Playing the Man's Game', 22-29.
26. Pavlidis and Connor, 'Men in a 'women only' sport?', 1359.
27. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 122-155.
28. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, 2.
29. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.
30. Cockburn and Clarke, 'Everybody's looking at you!', 61.
31. Hills et al, 'It Should Be Better All Together', 59; Hills, 'Friendship, Physicality, and Physical Education', 320.
32. Pfister, 'Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Women and Football', 563.
33. Poulton, 'If You Had Balls, You'd be One of Us!' 'Doing Gendered Research', online.
34. Elliot, *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 38.
35. Riessman, 'Narrative Analysis', 4.
36. Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football', 187.
37. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital'. 81-93.
38. McCaughey, 'The Fighting Spirit', 277-300.
39. Hills and Croston, 'It Should Be Better All Together', 598.
40. Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, 146.
41. Hills, 'Friendship, Physicality, and Physical Education', 327.
42. Winner, *Those Feet: A Sensual History of English Football*, 9-10.
43. Sailors, 'Off the beaten path: should women compete against men?', 5; Foddy and Savulescu, 'Time to Re-evaluate Gender Segregation in Athletics?' 1184-1188.
44. Pfister, 'Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Women and Football', 563-569.
45. Hills and Croston, 'It Should Be Better All Together', 599.
46. Houlihan, *Sport and Society*, 133; Caudwell, 'Women's Experiences of Gender and Sexuality in Football', 131.



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I would like to thank the reviewer's for comments on the revised paper. The principal concern regarding the positioning of the paper in terms of how it fits into, and differentiates from current literature, was the main point of contention. Therefore, I have taken some time to update and clarify this position. I have conducted a further literature search to capture more recent developments in this area. As such, the inclusion of extra discussion of relevant literatures pertaining to issues of sexualities and mixed-sex sports are outlined and cited in the introduction (highlighted in blue font) and the position of the paper reinforced in the conclusion (also highlighted in blue font). Discussion of sexualities citing Jayne Caudwell's and Scarlett Drury's work. Also included is reference to Rory McGrath's work on men's football and homophobia, and Marie Larneby's work on mixed-sex floorball, amongst others. These are included as a means of situating the paper further in the current body of relevant literature, which broadly examines attitudinal contests rather than the differing attitudes towards the acquisition of physical capital between male and female bodies. In these terms, this is to clarify the position of this paper as an exploration of how female football players challenge anxieties around physicality in women's bodies, the participation in mixed-sex contexts that can feasibly be productive spaces for the development of women's football in the longer term.

Some general cleaning up of grammar and editing of unclear sentence structures.